ALL THINGS NEW
Revelations 21:1-6
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In the one thousand nine hundred odd year existence of the Christian church there have been some very difficult times. In fact, I've always imagined that people in each age thought that theirs was the most difficult. That's a venerable old parlour game which we all play on occasion. Who among us hasn't gone a couple of rounds of "I had it rougher than you" with children or friends: "I worked harder, had less, studied more, and walked miles through blinding snowstorms to school each morning without anyone ever driving me every time it's below 40°"?

It is difficult to be a Christian in every age. Each age presents particular challenges. On measure, however, there have been a few truly awful times. And everyone agrees that one of them was near the end of the first century, about the time the last book in the Bible was written, the Book of Revelation.

The Roman Emperor was a devious and cruel man by the name of Domitian. He was probably mad. He thought he was a god. A few of his predecessors had encouraged veneration of the emperor - bowing one's head in his presence, or in the presence of his statue. Domitian, on the other hand, insisted on it. He required public sacrifices to himself as divine. He ordered his household to address him as "Our lord and god." He was even heard to refer to the bed he slept in as god's couch and the food he ate as sacred meat and potatoes.

Domitian was particularly irritated by the Christians. And so he issued an order. All known Christians were to be given a choice: they could worship him as their god, or they could be executed.

The persecution of 95-96 A.D. was very bitter. It's possible to talk about now - but when you begin to think about it, it becomes unspeakable. Many, many people were simply put to death for their faith. Many others, denied their faith - or at least worshipped the emperor with their fingers crossed. Fortunately the Roman soldiers had other things to do besides looking for and killing Christians, and so the persecution didn't succeed in ridding the empire of this subversive element. But it was an awful time to try to be faithful to Jesus Christ. (see Edward W. Bauman, Introduction to the New Testament, p. 141ff)

One of the reasons so many of those Christians were brave and strong and true was a little book that they circulated among themselves. It was written by a feisty old Christian who had been thrown in jail and exiled to the island of Patmos, even before Domitian appeared. He wrote in a kind of code which the Christians all understood but which thoroughly baffled the Romans. He called the Roman Empire some very unflattering names; he poked fun at the emperors, and he assured those scared people that God would be with them; that things would turn out all right even though they were terrible at the moment, that not even death could separate them from God's love. And it worked! John of Patmos told them that the end was near: that something new and astonishing was about to happen.

He was both right and wrong by the way. The end of the world didn't come, obviously. But in a very real sense the end of that age did. Something astonishing did begin to happen almost immediately. Domitian was assassinated by one of his servants who got tired, I suppose, of addressing him as lord and god, and the next five Roman Emperors were friendly to the Christians. The persecuted church grew and grew, and before long the empire became its protector.

But that little book, The Book of Revelation, during those dark days of persecution, helped to strengthen the resolve of some people who didn't have much hope. It's too bad, by the way, that modern people can't seem to understand the Book of Revelation and are as baffled by it as the Romans were. But that's another story. The important point is that one of the fundamental principles of the Christian faith is that the future is in God's hands: that God will be working in ways that may not be noticeable at the time, but God will be in the future: we can count on it.

That doesn't mean that the future will be easy or even safe. Domitian went right on killing Christians until he died. It does mean that there is a power more real, stronger even than death, and that is the power of God's love. And when you understand that, there simply isn't very much that can scare you - or even worry you much anymore.

On the first day of a brand new year, that is worth saying and hearing and maybe even shouting - or at least singing about.

In a thoughtful editorial last week on the possibilities of peace, James Reston told the unvarnished truth. "It's not easy and to many people may seem silly this Christmas to write about peace and good will on earth." He noted that seldom in recent years has there been more conflict and tension in the world. But before we despair, Reston advised remembering that there have been other hopeless tangles that were resolved by patience and the "unexpected turnings of events." He concluded very much in the spirit of old John of Patmos..."Something new is happening," he wrote - all over the wrold: a new voice is heard today coming from people who "usually don't pay much attention to these things but have an instinct for life." It wouldn't surprise me if Reston had just read the 21st chapter of the old Book of Revelations. (New York Times, 12-21/83)

"We live in the time of the parenthesis...bracketed off from both past and future" another wise observer said last year. "We have not yet embraced the future. We have done the human thing: we are clinging to the past in fear of the unknown." John Naisbitt concluded Megatrends also in words reminiscent of Revelation. "Although the time between eras is uncertain, it is a great and yeasty time, filled with opportunity..individually, professionally, institutionally - if we can only get a clear sense, a clear conceptive of the road ahead.

"My God, what a fantastic time to be alive..." (Megatrends, John Naisbitt, p. 249, 252)

None of us knows for sure what is ahead. The only thing certain is uncertainty. We don't know about our health, our personal survival, our relationships, our vocational progress, our personal or public business. And for some of us there are as many negative factors as there are positive possibilities.

But for all of us, one thing is certain. The God who loves us is in the future. The God who loves us enough to have sent a son to be born among us, is already in the future. The God who loves us enough to give the life of a blessed son is still the Lord and God of creation.

That's worth hearing on the first day of a brand new year.

Hear it now as it was written near the end of the first century, by an exiled brother in Christ, to people who couldn't bear to think about their future. Hear it - and be borne up by it.

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, appeared as a bride adored for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."
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> And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new.." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water without price from the fountain of the water of life..." (Revelation 21:1-6) Amen.